

Response to Harzem's Review of *Modern Perspectives on John B. Watson and Classical Behaviorism*

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The trouble here is that Harzem (1995) requires scholars to be partisan. He seems to want to reconstruct John B. Watson as a genius and a hero. But the scholar's role is to be neutral.

Watson may have been treated badly by the administration of Johns Hopkins and the Ickes family, but only by today's liberal standards would that be considered shameful. Harzem objects to the idea that Watson's personal characteristics—his charisma and charm—were both his strength and his undoing, but look at the events. Apart from gossip, he got into trouble twice because of sexual affairs; first with Mary Ickes, then with Rosalie Rayner. Today we take these matters lightly, but mores were different in the first half of this century. Why does Harzem imagine that Harold Ickes hated Watson so? To him, most likely, Watson was a social-climbing masher who took advantage of his sister. Had Watson been willing to go through a conventional courtship and taken time to win over his future brother-in-law, things might have gone differently. No doubt Watson's infidelity to Mary was the last straw for Harold, and Watson's unwillingness to repent drove him over the edge. One can imagine that the Rayner family had little affection for him either, and for much the same reasons: He violated all their sensibilities. It is reasonable to conclude from these events that Watson was at least brash, if not arrogant,

and had a large sexual appetite. To call the people who undid him small-minded is to judge by today's standards, an error that historians strive to avoid.

James makes an instructive contrast to Watson, because his personal life was much less flamboyant. Yet James, by all accounts, exerted tremendous influence over those with whom he came into contact. In this respect he resembled Watson.

As possible confirmation of such reasoning, we might consider all the textbooks that were written around the turn of the century that have passed into obscurity. Were they worse books, or did their authors fail to achieve the word-of-mouth advertising that charismatic characters like James and Watson received?

Watson was undoubtedly a brilliant person, but Harzem's suggestion that he was totally without influence from colleagues seems improbable at best. The men with whom he interacted at Johns Hopkins were matches for him in intellect. It is at least possible—I would argue that it is probable—that his interest in evolutionary theory, which proved sadly short-lived, arose from the influence of Jennings and Lashley. I can only express mystification at the assertions that my suggestion that Lashley, Meyer, Dunlap, Jennings, and Watson interacted as a group at Johns Hopkins between 1911 and 1917 is "patently inaccurate" and that "In fact, there was no such group" (p. 381). I don't know where Harzem gets his facts or how he can assume such an authoritative tone. My discussion was based on Robert Boakes's

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(1984) reporting in *From Darwin to Behaviourism*. Boakes spent much time and effort in Baltimore researching the events at Johns Hopkins. If I have to choose between accounts, I choose Boakes's, because it is based on dispassionate research rather than hero worship.

REFERENCES

- Boakes, R. (1984). *From Darwin to behaviourism: Psychology and the minds of animals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harzem, P. (1995). Searching in ruins for truth: The life and works of John B. Watson—A review of *Modern Perspectives on John B. Watson and Classical Behaviorism*. *The Behavior Analyst*, 18, 377–384.